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## (1) Challenge of the Day - Cubicle Clashes, Part II

Part II of our two-part series, Cubicle Clashes, focuses on a common concern for workers in close quarters; the problem of resolving workplace disputes. The previous edition of this e-magazine presented an employee who found a colleague's music distracting. In that scenario, consultation with workplace resource personnel helped our supervisor assist the distressed employee resolve the issue herself by talking one-on-one with her coworker. Using negotiation to resolve workplace conflict can often be very successful; however, it isn't sufficient in every situation. Our current issue of Leadership Today will examine another approach – that of guiding personnel to work as a group towards developing mutually satisfying agreements about work space issues.

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## (2) Exploring the Issue – Helping Your Workgroup Negotiate Their Conflicts

**Q.** Because our work spaces are closely situated, it can lead to a multitude of distractions and annoyances. Conflicts arise over a number of issues including disturbing cell phones; long, loud conversations; people intruding on others as they work in their cubicles; perfume allergies; differences in temperature preferences; and even food odors. Usually, tension builds up and employees finally approach me, asking me to “fix” their problem. When it's practical, I encourage people to work things out with each other. This approach works with some situations, but not all. Other times certain issues build over a period of time and require the cooperation of the entire group. There are also those situations in which previously resolved conflicts arise among different groups at different times. These kinds of conflicts crop up over recurring themes like climate control, use of speakerphones, loud cell-phone conversations, and frustration over perceived injustices and inconsiderate behaviors, like failing to clean up in the snack areas. In situations like these, I think our entire workgroup would benefit by working out these issues as a whole group. Is there a way for the group to get together in a productive, positive way and resolve these conflicts?

- A.** As you've stated, most workplace conflicts can be resolved individually. Yet there are times when it's more appropriate to bring workplace issues before the whole workgroup in order to decide on the most beneficial resolution – especially, when the issue is likely to arise again. As a manager, it's best to stay close enough to the workgroup to observe incidents of recurring conflicts so you can determine whether you should intervene with workplace disputes. Paradoxically, you must stay close enough to be watchful, yet you must enable them to resolve their own problems when feasible. How can you manage this? First, communicate to employees that you are available to listen and talk. Then, intervene only as needed, such as, when you become aware that they have reached an impasse, when a problem that may impact productivity is escalating, as well as in cases of potentially serious issues, such as harassment, threats, violence, substance abuse, or theft.

It is recommended that you take advantage of common or routine concerns, such as office clean-up or temperature control issues, and use them as opportunities to allow employees to engage as a group and to learn to work together to resolve issues. The process of negotiating their own rules on minor issues will build the group's cohesiveness and ability to work together. And, as long as the decisions are fair and benefit the group, it's best to allow them to set their own rules, making it more likely that people will abide by them.

Your supervisor, Human Resources (HR) staff, and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselors are excellent workplace resources to help you assist employees in dealing with issues such as these. Consult with them early in the process. If the particular situation is sensitive or stressful, early consultation is especially important.

See how such a situation might play out in the example below:

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### (3) Play it Out – When Conflicts Prevail

#### The Dynamics

You're wondering whether there will ever be peace in your workplace. With the high noise levels, overcrowding, and disputes over thermostat levels, it's amazing any work gets accomplished. You know that you need help to establish a collegial atmosphere at work.

#### The Action

"This is a disgusting mess! How hard is it to clean out the microwave when people make a mess?" A female voice complains in the distance. Within minutes, you're listening to an employee tell you that she is tired of cleaning up after inconsiderate co-workers.

In a nearby cubicle, a cell phone, ringing shrilly, is answered by an employee who proceeds to engage in a loud conversation against a background of jokes and banter that carries across eight workspaces.

Meanwhile, two people walk past you wearing sweaters and rubbing their hands together to keep warm looking at you in obvious misery.

Suddenly noticing your ice cold hands, you realize that the temperature has varied as much as 10 degrees several times over the course of the day, and it dawns on you that the "temperature-tug-of-war" must be on again.

First, consult with your supervisor and other resources such as EAP and HR staff. Give them an overview of what has been happening and get their evaluation and input.

If you decide to call a staff meeting and you feel unsure of your ability to gauge and facilitate staff dynamics, perhaps one of your resource people can sit in as a coach to the group and to you.

Announce a meeting at a time when all workplace members will be available to participate. Let employees know that the purpose of the meeting will be to come together as a group with the goal of arriving at a consensus about effecting some workplace changes to everyone's benefit.

- Engage the group beforehand by asking for agenda items. Request that they speak only of their experience and needs and refrain from naming other people in the memos or in the meeting.
- Allow yourself several days to review the agenda and determine if any of the issues are potentially too sensitive or explosive to manage in a group setting. Those you will address outside of the meeting.
- If you decide to refrain from addressing certain issues in the group, inform the parties concerned (individually) that, since the issue is sensitive, you'd like to set aside time apart from the group to deal with it personally.

- If you have concerns about an agenda item that is too sensitive or negative, consult with the EAP and/or your other worksite resources on ways to handle the dispute outside of the group.

You resolve to explore the idea of conducting a group discussion to address these issues.

"Everyone's been doing a great job of working together so that we can build a harmonious working environment. Many of you have had significant successes in negotiating space and work needs individually.

However, in some areas there are issues that are more global and affect the entire workgroup. In these areas, the workgroup would benefit most by resolving issues together. For example, issues such as temperature control affect the entire work staff and it would be best if everyone had some input in negotiating the solution. In addition to temperature control, other areas that I'd like the group to work on include general upkeep of the snack area, cell phone use in the work areas, and general workplace noise.

I'd also like to get some input from those of you who have had some successes working things out individually. Send me an email about what has worked for you so we can examine what made it work. In your email, describe resolutions, lessons learned, or common understandings you've reached. You don't have to name names, just talk about how you resolved your issue(s). Also, I'd like to hear from anyone who has concerns, suggestions, or ideas. Please let me know via email by Monday. Then, let's get together next Thursday at 10:00 a.m."

Mary sends you an e-mail saying "I really don't like working with John. He acts like my superior and tries to micromanage my work. He can be bossy and very unpleasant to be around at times."

- You are aware that there have been negative interactions between John and Mary and are concerned that the problem could escalate. You call the EAP regarding how to handle this complaint.

In talking with Mary, you learn that John's "bossiness" occurs whenever Mary is working on a particular assignment. This is an area you had assigned to John before Mary joined the staff.

- The EAP advises you to deal with Mary's complaint outside of the meeting by confidentially exploring her statement about John's bossiness. Ask for more information. Determine whether there could be work-related reasons behind the bad feelings. Also examine your own possible role in the situation.

You realize you had never addressed this duplication of effort with John, but had publicly praised Mary several times for her accomplishments in this area. You decide to address this oversight with him and offer him an assignment that provides him with an opportunity for professional development, which he welcomes. Later Mary tells you that their relationship has improved.

#### At the meeting:

- Recruit someone to document the decisions and distribute them to each participant afterwards.
- Bring up each topic and facilitate the group in resolving the issue themselves in a respectful manner.
- If resolution of a particular issue becomes difficult or the group gets bogged down on a particular topic, set the topic aside to "let it simmer," and move to the next topic temporarily. Let the group know before hand so they will understand the rationale for setting a topic aside and not feel like it is a failure on their part.
- When trying to come up with ideas to resolve issues use brainstorming.
- Brainstorming is a technique in which the facilitator solicits all suggestions without comment or criticism. The facilitator then engages people in grouping items (i.e., placing like items together) and then evaluating the suggestions, including eliminating those that clearly will not meet needs or need to be put into the "parking lot" for later discussion or review.

"Jim, thanks for being the recorder. Will you please send out our solutions to everybody afterwards?"

"I'd like the group to explore each issue and then use brainstorming so that all possible ideas can be considered." Explain brainstorming to the group.

"If we find that we become bogged down with a particular topic, we're going to set it aside, 'let it simmer' for awhile and come back to it. Sometimes, this allows for more creative solutions. If this happens, I want you to remember that it isn't any kind of failure of the group's ability to resolve an issue. It's actually an effective strategy that is often used to help groups reach consensus.

Also, I'd like the group to explore what we do well in this office that helps us reach our goals together?" Allow the group to contribute, list what's working well.

"What are some of the other agreements we have reached in smaller groups that enable us to work well together?" Allow the group to contribute their successes.

"What have we learned that could tell us how to negotiate our work needs relating to cell phones?" List the possibilities.

"What are some potential solutions?"

Allow the group to brainstorm suggestions.

"Let's group all your brainstormed ideas and suggestions that are similar." Allow the group to decide on which are similar.

"How might some of these solutions work? Are there any barriers to their working?" Accept all ideas and list them.

- Take direction from the group in documenting their ideas, but when selecting solutions, ensure that group members perceive that the solutions are equitable, and are seen as beneficial by the group.
- After much discussion, the group determines ways that they can agree to handle each issue.
- Read the list of solutions to the group and elicit consensus or "buy in" from the group.

"Here is the list of solutions you've developed:

1. **Cell phones** - Put cell phones on silent display or pulsing mode while in the office. Refrain from taking calls during meetings or when in the work area. Excuse yourself from the work area to return any personal calls during breaks.
2. **Voice noise** – Speak in 'library tones' inside cubicles and in nearby common areas such as corridors. Don't use the speakerphone if others can hear it. Use an office with a door for extended meetings and to use the speakerphone. Don't engage in conversations for more than three minutes in common paths near work areas. Use the "three-minute rule" for personal conversations during work, saving longer discussions for meal times or other breaks.
3. **Temperature** – One person will coordinate the controls and keep notes on what works best over time. For the time being, everyone will bring extra clothing so that they can "layer" clothing for flexibility with temperature needs. Then, the group will agree on a temperature range.
4. **Reducing work time intrusions** – A 'deadline in progress' poster will be designed and distributed for people to post near their cubicle entrance when needed. When this sign is up, everyone knows to leave a note or come back later."



Schedule a follow-up meeting to let people evaluate the progress, explore any lack of resolution and make any needed adjustments.

"Let's give these solutions a try and see how they work for us. Then we can meet again this time next month to check on our progress. How about Tuesday, the fifth?"

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#### (4) Tip of the Day

When bringing employees together to resolve issues amicably, keep in mind the following:

- For your work unit to run smoothly, you will want to remain approachable. Set an example of personal warmth and keep in touch with what's happening around you.
- Encourage and coach staff in resolving their own everyday disputes, helping individuals tactfully make requests of others. You may also facilitate group meetings.
- Quietly screen conflicts to rule out serious strife or potential legal issues. Ensure that you or other organizational influences haven't been a causative factor. If this occurs, take prompt remedial action, as guided by your workplace resources such as HR and EAP.
- In setting up group resolutions, screen out any potential personal confrontations beforehand by engaging the group early in developing the agenda.
- Throughout this process, you'll want early and continuous consultation from, at minimum, your supervisor, HR, and the EAP.

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#### (5) Resources to Make Your Day

- There are a number of free EAP presentations available to help supervisors and employees interact with others more effectively. These include *Communication Skills*; *Dealing with Difficult People*; *Conflict Resolution (1) for Supervisors and (2) for Employees*; *Conflict Management: Alternative Dispute Resolution*; *Respect and Positive Interaction in the Workplace*; *Men and Women on the Job*; and *Cultural Diversity*.
- FOH's list of worksite presentations is available online on our website ([www.foh.dhhs.gov/Public/WhatWeDo/Training/EAPtrainings.asp](http://www.foh.dhhs.gov/Public/WhatWeDo/Training/EAPtrainings.asp)).
- If you have any questions about scheduling EAP presentations, contact your agency EAP Point of Contact.
- For a self-test on your personal conflict management style, go to the FOH website at [www.foh4you.com](http://www.foh4you.com). Enter site with or without registering. Click on *Library & Resources* (center top). Click on *Self-assessments*. Under *Anger Management*, click on *Conflict Management Test*.
- You will find resources and guidance for managers and supervisors at [www.FOH4you.com](http://www.FOH4you.com). Click on *Library and Resources* at the top of the home page, then click on the letter *M* under *Library Catalog*. Next, click on *Manager*. You will find many useful articles ranging from *Email Etiquette*, to *Managing Employee Issues*, to *Turf Issues in an Organization*.
- Remember that the EAP is available 24/7 for a telephonic Supervisor Consultation. Call toll-free at

1 800-222-0364.

- FOH provides a range of Organizational Development (OD) consultation, including conflict resolution and mediation. For more information, visit the FOH website or call Julie Dunnwald, Ph.D., at 206-615-2638 ([jdunnwald@psc.gov](mailto:jdunnwald@psc.gov)).

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## **(6) About this Ezine and How to Contribute a Topic**

The FOH EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, training and consultation to Federal employees and agencies worldwide. The goal of this e-magazine is to help Federal leaders address their workplace relationship concerns. Please let us know your topics of interest by contacting Diane Stephenson, Ph.D., at 1 312-886-3942 ([DStephenson@psc.gov](mailto:DStephenson@psc.gov)).

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*healthy bodies  
sound minds  
a safe place to work*

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